WOMEN OF NORTH KOREA — YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Soon Man Rhim

The Communist regime has had a profound effect on the lives of women in North Korea. The status of women of traditional Korea is to be compared with that of present day North Korea. By "traditional" Korea, is meant, in general, that segment of population between the two extreme groups known as "nobility class"[1] at the top and the "despised people"[2] at the bottom, during the period of the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910).

Historically, especially during the Yi Period (1392-1910), the feudal Confucian influence had made a tremendous mark on Korean culture. Confucianism played a leading role which has the effect of degrading the women's status in traditional Korean society. Confucius had little enough to say about women. But what he did say was decisive and far-reaching in its effect. David and Vera Mace noted in their book:

> He [Confucius] based his whole teaching about human society upon the patriarchal family, ancestor worship, and the duty of filial piety. The function of the women within this system was simple and clear. It could be summed up in one four-letter word — 'obey.' Woman is a creature born to obedience.[3]

---

[1] According to Man Gab Lee, six classes, plus an outcaste group, existed in the traditional Korean social system: the royalty, the nobility (*yangban*), the country gentry (*hyangban*), the middle folk (*chungin*), the illegitimate sons of nobility (*soja*), the commoners, (*sangmin*), and the "humble folk" (*ch'onmin*). *Han'guk Nongch'on-ui sahoekujo* (The Social Structure of Korean Villages), Vol. V (Seoul: Korean Research Center, 1960), pp. 4-5.

[2] This class included Buddhist monks, nuns, shamans, buffoons, traveling dancers, singers and the *Paekchong*; and also included private and public slaves. For a detailed account of the "despised people" see Gregory Henderson, *Korea, the Politics of the Vortex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 53-55.

[3] David and Vera Mace, *Marriage: East and West* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959), p. 67.

Throughout her life her duty was to follow the three obediences:

1. Before marriage to obey the father.
2. After marriage to obey the husband.
3. In the event of the husband's death, to obey her son.[4]

The quality of her obedience was to be unquestioning and absolute.

These conservative Confucian ideas came into being toward the end of the Koryo Period (918-1392). Numerous writers and commentators of the Yi Period elaborated upon the theme, and drew up detailed rules for women's behavior. Women were required to accept and maintain all these rules which were based on her inferior status. The patriarchal view of women's inferiority was manifested in many ways. Foremost among these was the traditional marriage system.

I

The traditional marriage system in Korea was very severe. Young people did not dare to choose their marriage partners. It was a special feature of the system that parents alone could arrange the marriage of a boy or a girl. Any romance between a boy and a girl was regarded as disgraceful and sinful, and was supposed to be unfilial to parents — even up to modern times (c. 1919):

> The Code of the Yi Dynasty, which continued in Korea until 1910, declared a love marriage to be illegitimate and subject to punishment.[5]

Girls were usually betrothed in their early childhood by arrangements between parents. Since the fifteenth century, the minimum age of a bride was set at fourteen years. This however, in reality was thirteen years, since Koreans reckon age from conception rather than from birth, as is done in China. In special cases, if the parents were over fifty years of age, or seriously ill, a daughter could be legally married at twelve years (which meant actually eleven years).[6] Public opinion, however, was opposed to these early unions, and the legal age was then changed to sixteen years by the Kabo Reform of 1894.[7] This reform measure also stipulated that a boy may marry when he reached the age of twenty-nine years.

---

[4] *Ibid.*
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 134.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 201.
[7] The Kabo Reform had the following historical background: In August of 1894, the Sino-Japanese war broke out in Korea, and Japan quickly defeated the Chinese armies. As a result of this victory, Japan

In practice these laws had not been observed. It was not unusual for the girl to marry at twelve or thirteen and for the boy to marry at about ten years.[8] As late as the 1920s, it was found that six per cent of girls under fifteen were already married.[9] In the countryside, it was common practice for a girl to marry the boy who was two or three years, or four to five years, younger than herself.[10] In certain cases, the young bride had to baby-sit her child bridegroom. She became simply one more added hand to help in the backbreaking chores of the family.

The idea of bride price was disliked in Korea. However, among the poorer peasant families, a cash payment was usually made to the bride's family. In P'yongan-nam Province, for example, at the turn of the century, it took an average of 1,000 to 1,300 nyang for a peasant's son to get married.[11] (An'yang' was a 1.325 oz. copper coin.)

Sometimes the purchase price of the bride increased with the age of the bride. Estimating that one year of age would equal 100 nyang, a bridegroom had to pay 900 nyang for a nine-year-old bride, or 1,500

---

established a pro-Japanese government in Korea. The king was pressed to make a number of reforms which were designed to modernize the country. These reforms, supported also by Korean reformist factions who were under Japanese influence, were established and became known as the Kabo Reform of 1894. It extended to every field of economic activity, politics, society, and culture. But in the main the reform was not successful because of the lack of the groundwork of education, enlightenment, and propaganda by the government. Furthermore, this reform was unable to convince the citizens of its validity, since it came out of a pro-Japanese government which had emerged suddenly under Japanese military influence. Takashi Hatada, *A History of Korea,* trans. and ed. Warren W. Smith, Jr. and Benjamin H. Hazard (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, Inc., 1959), p. 102. See also, Son Kun Lee, *Han'guksa* (A History of Korea), ed. Chindan Hakhoe, Vol (Seoul: Ulyusa, 1971), pp. 242-245.

[8] Byong Su Lee, *Ch'osenno kongingho* (The Marriage and Divorce Laws of Korea) (Tokyo: Syopungkwan, 1966), p. 56. Regarding child marriage Mr. Nam Hun Paik, one of the prominent leaders of recent Korean politics, described his own experience in his autobiography. In 1894, at the age of less than ten years, he was married to a girl five years his senior. "In those days," he wrote, "child marriage was one of the bad customs of our society. It seemed more prevalent in P'yongan and Hwanghae Provinces, the northwestern section of Korea. Early marriage was more encouraged in well-to-do families with many children. Nam Hun Paik, *Naui ilsaeng* (My Lifetime) (Seoul: Sinthyonsilsa, 1973), p. 51.

[9] Mace, *op. cit.* p. 201.

[10] Byong Su Lee, *op. cit.,* p. 56.

[11] Sin Suk Kim, "Urinara Hyoptongchohap Nongminui Kachokp'ungsup" (Family Life on the Co-op Farm), *Minsokhak Yongu Ch'ongso* (Compendium of Studies on Folklore), Vol. II (Pyongyang: Academy of Science, 1959), p. 45.

[12] *Ibid.*

nyang for a fifteen-year-old bride. This price was paid at the time of betrothal and was called *sonkup-ton* (advance money). A bride's price was often too burdensome for a poor peasant; in which case, he might sell his daughter in marriage in order to buy a daughter-in-law for his son with the money received for the daughter.[12] The practice of the husband's family paying a price for the bride was an influential factor in keeping her in subordinate status. If a family was too poor to raise their daughter, it was preferred that she be brought up by her future husband's parents. The girls' family would rather do this than sell her into slavery or prostitution.[13]

Traditionally, polygamy was practiced by some of the well-to-do to perpetuate the family lineage if the wife had not borne sons. Yet, concubinage was prevalent among those who did have many sons. Here one could observe the deeply rooted human factors: the desire for variegated sex experience and romance that were suppressed in 'arranged' marriages. The practice of concubinage made a woman simply a sex object, besides making her a constant threat to the wife. Many Korean wives must have been quite unhappy. They were required to follow their husbands no matter what their lot. And, even though there was not legal prohibition on remarriage, in the case of a husband's death, yet it was customary under the patriarchal system of Korea to require a widow to remain faithful to one husband and not to remarry.[14] She remained in the family.

The social custom regarding faithfulness of a wife to one husband, was so strong that the mere touching of hands could cause a woman to believe herself unfaithful. This illustration is a true story:

> In 1592, during the Japanese invasion of Korea, an escaping refugee women was attempting to get into a boat. A rower in the boat helped to pull her in by her hand. The woman cried that she had lost her chastity, and threw herself into the river and committed suicide.[15]

If a widow should remarry, she would be considered guilty of an unfilial act against her husband's family. One way in which this sentiment was expressed was to declare sons of such marriages legally unfit to occupy any official position.[16] Even with such restriction, it is interesting to note that "widow abduction" occurred.[17]

---

[13] Mace, *op. cit.*, p. 169.
[14] Byong Su Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
[15] Helen Kim, *The Role of Women in the Next Half Century.* (Seoul: Ewha Woman's University, 1968), p. 11.
[16] Mace, *op. cit.*, p. 251.
[17] The *Dong-A-Ilbo,* May 12, 1975, p. 4.

Speaking of the traditional treatment of widows in Korea, the so-called "technical widow" should be mentioned. This was due to the custom of early betrothal. As David and Vera Mace state in their book:

> A widow's troubles could begin early in life. Incredible as it may seem, it was even possible to be born a widow! In Korea, as in China, pregnant mothers sometimes formally betrothed their unborn children. If the boy died before the girl was born, this made her technically a widow. If married later in life, her status would be that of a remarried widow and not a maiden.[18]

It was only in 1894, by the Kabo Reform, that freedom of remarriage, without censure, was accorded to widows.[19]

The traditional idea of superiority of men over women stripped women completely of freedom of divorce in Korea. The right of divorce granted only to men, however, was usually left to the man's parents for taking action. Divorce, therefore, was called *ki-cho,* meaning "abandoned wife."[20] Parents were able to make or break their children's marriage even when their sons and daughters were adults of thirty or forty years of age.

If a son loved his wife, but his parents did not like her, he was compelled to divorce her. In Korea, as in China, it was believed that one of the first duties is toward parents. Consequently, it was much more important for a son to please his parents than to please his wife. Only since 1923, has it been possible for divorce to be granted based on the agreement of the two parties concerned.[21]

There were seven legitimate grounds for divorcing a wife in traditional Korean society: (1) Rebellion toward her parents-in-law; (2) Failure to produce a son; (3) Unfaithfulness to her husband; (4) Jealousy; (5) Had an incurable disease; (6) Given to talebearing and pernicious talk; and (7) Was found to be a thief.[22] However, there were three conditions under which a wife could not be sent away, even though grounds existed for divorce: (1) If she shared with her husband a three-year mourning period for one of his parents; (2) if the husband had become rich or attained a high position since marriage; and (3) If she had no home to return to.[23] These three restraints,

---

[18] Mace, *op. cit.,* p. 260.
[19] Son Kun Lee, *op. cit.,* p. 244.
[20] Byong Su Lee, *op. cit.,* p. 50.
[21] The *Dong-A-Ilbo,* May 12, 1975, p. 4.
[22] Byong Su Lee, *op. cit.,* pp. 50-51.
[23] *Ibid.,* p. 51.

however, could not serve in a case where the wife committed adultery, or had an incurable disease.[24]

If a wife left her husband even with just cause, she could be given punishment of 100 lashes. If she ran away and remarried, the legal penalty was death by hanging.[25] For an adulteress, Korean society appeared to be a little more lenient than traditional Chinese society. The woman was expected to take her own life. And, a wife who committed adultery in Korea, was not put to death, but lost her status as wife and became a slave.[26] She was never allowed to remarry.[27]

In addition to the conditions discussed thus far, there were other inhuman treatments which relate to the low status of women in Korea. In the past, a Korean woman was denied her name for a lifetime. Until marriage she was called simply by her childhood name, such as, *sopunne* (regretable or disappointing), *koptani* (pretty), *poksili* (happy), *k'unnyon* (big) or *chakunnyon* (little one). After marriage, however, even this childhood name was discarded and she was known to the community only by the surname of her husband's family, example, 'Kim-si' (Mrs. Kim), 'Lee-si' (Mrs. Lee) or 'Choi-si' (Mrs. Choi). In the home she was addressed by a kinship term denoting her position in the family organization or by her children's name plus the word for mother, for example, 'Happy's mother'.[28]

With the advent of the feudalistic Yi Dynasty, commoners were granted the privilege of having a name. Still the privilege was not given to women. Even a high government official's wife did not enjoy her own name.[29] As recent as seventy years ago, when women had to appear in court for legal purposes, they were given certain convenient names in order to facilitate court procedures.[30] Only in 1909, in accordance with the census registration law of that year,[31] were they given the privelege of having names for the first time.

Separation of the sexes was another form of mistreatment of women. When boys and girls reached the age of seven, they were not allowed to sit together. In the home, they were not permitted to use the same

---

[24] *Ibid.*
[25] Mace, *op. cit.*, p. 248.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 236.
[27] Byong Su Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
[28] Sin Suk Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
[29] The *Dong-A-Ilbo*, May 12, 1975, p. 4.
[30] Helen Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
[31] The *Dong-A-Ilbo*, May 12, 1975, p. 4.

towels, hangers, or other commodities. They had to use separate items. For example, no girl could use a towel designated for her brother. Even within the household, Korean women were strictly segregated from the men in the family. The arrangement of the household was such that the husband lived in the front room while the wife was closed off in the rear room. On the street, or in public, it was the rule for the wife to walk several steps behind the husband.[32] Men could walk freely on the streets during the daytime; Korean women, however, were not permitted to do so. Certain times were set aside, enforced by curfew, when women could pass through the streets — late evening until dawn. Regarding this women's hour, however, it is interesting to note that:

> During this time no men were permitted on the streets except those who were blind, or public officials. Any male who dared to trespass on the streets during what might be called the women's hour, ran the risk of being caught and having his head chopped off by the public executioner![33]

In case a woman had to go out during the daytime, she was obliged to wear a special jacket, which she drew up to cover her face.[34]

This practice of secluding women varied, however, according to necessity and to the social status of the family. It is reported that:

> Wives of farmers and workmen were obliged to work in the fields and the shops, and of necessity were permitted much greater freedom than their higher-born sisters.[35]

Nevertheless, even in their case, extreme modesty was regarded as a primary virtue.

This rule of separation between the sexes persisted until about the beginning of the twentieth century. With the extreme forms of segregation, women in Korea were neither seen nor heard. Thus, they were inevitably cut off from opportunities for independence in social activities. Women were not only generally denied the benefits of formal education, but also were discouraged from developing any natural ability or talent which might be useful for a career outside the home. "A woman's lack of talent is in itself a virtue," and "If a hen crows, the household crumbles," were frequently used proverbs to check any worldly ambitions of a woman. The result was a general lack of

---

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] Hyontay Kim, *Folklore and Customs of Korea* (Seoul: Korean Information Service, Inc, Inc., 1957), p. 90.

[34] The *Dong-A-Ilbo*, May 12, 1975, p. 4.

[35] Hyontay Kim, *loc. cit.*

professional skills among women and an incomparably higher percentage of illiteracy among women,[36] than among men.

For a woman, her most trying period began with her marriage. She was a stranger in the new family, under relentless surveillance and discipline from the parents-in-law, unprotected by the supposedly intimate husband. A woman's first duties were to her husband's parents; only secondarily was she responsible to her husband. "A wife or concubine who made insulting remarks to her parents-in-law could be hanged without delay.[37] She was expected to submit to her husband as she submitted to her parents-in-law. The harshness of the mother-in-law was especially notorious. The only consolation for the daughter-in-law was that one day she could hope to be a mother-in-law herself.

Until she gave birth to a son, a wife felt as if she "sat on a cushion of needles." With the birth of a son, her duty was fulfilled in perpetuating the ancestral lineage and she found protection and security in the future of her son. In case a woman was childless or failed to bear sons, this was attributed to her own unforgivable "sin."[38] Dr. Gale, who landed in Korea as an American Presbyterian missionary during the winter of 1886, spoke of the mother having no son:

> If she has no son, alas for her! better had she never been born. Not only is she condemned by her husband and every member of the clan, but she condemns herself, and no ray of sunshine ever gladdens her broken soul. She is Rachel, and Hannah, and Elizabeth, as they were before joy visited them.[39]

Even the treatment accorded to the woman during the childbearing period accented the difference of the sexes. Giving birth to a son, the young mother was encouraged to lie quiet in bed two or three weeks. However, if the mother bore a girl and lay in bed more than one week, she was put to shame or had to suffer an insult. In the Hamyang district in Kyongsang-nam Province, noted as a stronghold of Confucianism, it was customary for the mother-in-law to prepare a feast

---

[36] It is recorded that all women were totally unlettered until the middle of the Yi Period (1392-1910). Even after that, only some privileged women were permitted to read a few books exclusively. The reason given was that women did not need to cultivate the intellect. Sun Dok Yun, "Han'guk Yosong Undong Ui Inyomgwa Banghyang" (The Idea and Direction of the Korean Women's Movement), *Taehwa* (Dialogue), (March 1975), p. 8.

[37] Mace, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

[38] Sin Suk Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

[39] James S. Gale, *Korea in Transition* (New York: Educational Department, The Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1909), p. 104.

when the daughter-in-law gave birth to a boy as an offering to the three gods governing childbirth. If, however, a girl-child was born, the mother-in-law immediately left the house and would not return for almost a week, as an expression of regret and disappointment for a newly arrived baby girl. This disappointment was transmitted even to the girl-child by the way she was named *soun* (disappointment), *sopsop* (pity), *put'ong* (anger) or *yukam* (regret).[40] Even a baby crib was a method to show discrimination. A boy had a fancy crib, whereas the girl had a plain one.[41]

In this connection, Dr. Gale said again:

> The woman's place, first as daughter, one of contempt. A missionary's little six-year-old once came to him with tears in her eyes and said: 'Papa, I have a question.' 'Yes, what is it?' 'Are you sorry that I wasn't a boy?' 'Well I should say not, I wouldn't trade you for a dozen boys. But why do you ask?' She said, 'The Koreans were talking just now, and they pointed at me and said, 'What a pity that she wasn't a boy!'[42]

Then Dr. Gale stated, regarding the stark picture of women's status in Korea: "She has been the slave, the dog, the toy, the chattel, the convenience of men, for all past ages.[43] Despite this situation, he did not despair of the future for Korean women. He observed: "Thus was, yes, and still is, the world of woman, but mighty changes are taking place, and underneath the framework of her prison-house, earthquakes are shaking."[44]

II

During the closing years of the nineteenth century, new voices were heard advocating the improvement of women's status. A frontal criticism of the traditional idea of women did begin with the Tonghak (Eastern Learning) Movement. This movement was begun in the 1860's by Ch'oe Cheu, a Korean scholar who attempted to combine certain features of Roman Catholicism with the native Korean religions. The movement spread widely in the southern provinces until 1865, when persecution by the authorities broke out against Roman Catholicism and Ch'oe was executed on the charge that he was an adherent of that faith.

---

[40] The *Dong-A-Ilbo*, May 12, 1975, p. 4.
[41] Sun Dok Yun, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
[42] Gale, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-104.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 106.
[44] *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

The Tonghak sect, after thirty years of endurance, reappeared under the leading banner of General Chon Pongjun in 1894. It gathered considerable strength as a political reform movement against the corruption of the ruling officials who were ruthlessly oppressing the common people.[45]

What is most significant in the Tonghak movement, in connection with our present study, is to be found in its petition of human rights which may be classified as the claims of (1) human integrity, (2) elevation of the farmers' status in the society, (3) demolition of class society, and (4) equality of sexes.[46] Thus, as in the fourth claim, the Tonghak Movement began to raise social consciousness on the status of women. This is remembered as a very important turning point in the history of Korean women.

As successor of Ch'oe Cheu, Ch'oe Sihyong became the second Tonghak leader. In November 1889, Ch'oe Sihyong announced the six articles of discipline to guide the followers' daily life. According to Article I:

> Revere your wife as a god. Love your daughter-in-law. Love slaves as your own children. . . . If not, Heaven will get angry.[47]

His unswerving devotion to establishing human rights and particularly his efforts for women's enlightenment is amazing, especially in the light of the social milieu of those days. He went as far as to free his own two slavegirls — one became his daughter-in-law, and the other he adopted as his daughter.[48] In addition, according to one of the twelve points proposed by General Chon Pongjun to the government at the time of the Tonghak Rebellion of 1894, it was demanded that young widows be permitted to remarry.[49]

Furthermore, leaders of the Tonghak movement continued their efforts to awaken the awareness of Korean women through educational activities. For example, by taking charge of the Tongdok Girls' School in 1909, they made an important contribution to the development of women's education.[50]

---

[45] For a detailed discussion, see Son Kun Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-123.

[46] Bon Ryong Sin, *Tonghaktang Yon'gu* (Some Studies of Tonghak Society) (Seoul: T'amgutang, 1973), pp. 63-67.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 195.

[48] Chong Ch'ang Mun, *Kunseilbon-ui Choson Ch'imt'alsa* (A History of the Modern Japanese Invasion and Assault on Korea) Seoul: Paekmundang, 1964), p. 340.

[49] *Ibid.*, pp. 361-362.

[50] Bon Ryong Sin, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

Another influence in the elevation of women's status in Korea was the Independence Club,[51] organized in 1896 by a group of progressive leaders. The head of the club was Dr. Philip Jaisohn, a Korean statesman educated in the United States and converted to Christianity. In this political reform organization, the problem of the status of women was also actively debated. For example, the *Independent,* the first vernacular newspaper started by Dr. Philip Jaisohn, editorialized on the 21st of April:

> Korean women live a pitiful life. We appeal to the Korean people in behalf of these depressed women. Despite the fact that the woman's life is never inferior to man's life, women have been mistreated by men. It is due to the fact that men are still unenlightened. Instead of becoming reasonable and humane, men try to use only their brawn to oppress women. How barbarous they are! But as the Korean women become educated and well informed, they will come to realize the equality of the sexes and will know how to handle unreasonable men. In view of these facts, we call on the Korean women to be educated so as to become superior to men intellectually and morally, and to claim the rights of women.[52]

Here one can see a strong message calling on the Korean women to be awakened.

In September of the same year, the *Independent* again urged the government to give women equal opportunity with men in receiving education. It stated: "If the government would establish a school for boys, it is only fair to do the same for girls."[53]

A further influence in the elevation of Korean women was that of Protestant Christianity. Only toward the end of the nineteenthe century was the opportunity for education given to women and girls through the first Protestant Christian missions in Korea. Up to that time, the Confucian traditions had kept women within the bounds of the walls of their homes.

In 1886, the very beginning of women's education was started by Mrs. Mary Scranton, a missionary of the Methodist Episcopal Church North. It was established at Ewha (pear flower) with one student.[54]

---

[51] For a detailed discussion on the Independence Club Movement, see, Son Kun Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 830-866.

[52] Quoted in Son Dok Su, "Yosongui Haewa Yosonui In'ganhwa" (The International Women's Year and the Humanization of Women), *Kwangjang* (Forum), March 15, 1975, p. 4. (*Forum* is a periodical published in West Germany, by Association of Reconstruction of Democratic Society).

[53] Quoted in *Ewha Hakpo* (Ewha Review), June 6, 1975, p. 3, a publication of Ewha Women's University in Seoul.

[54] Helen Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

With this small beginning, in less than twenty years, ten other Christian schools for girls were founded by 1904.[55]

It should be mentioned that Korean women were enlightened not only through these schools, but also through the Church Educational Programs of these first Christian missions. Regarding the far-reaching effects of the Church Educational Programs, Dr. Helen Kim, a prominent Christian educator, observed:

> They helped to wipe out illiteracy by teaching women to read the Bible and to sing the hymns. Ideas such as democracy and world brotherhood were introduced to the rank and file of the people through Christian churches. Wiping out superstition, bringing about social class consciousness, and contributing to the women's own discovery of themselves as well as to the raising of their status are contributions brought about by these pioneer Christian missions.[56]

An early Presbyterian missionary in Korea, having seen some changes taking place in the status of women in the church, went so far as to say:

> The Gospel has been a large factor in liberating women in Korea. . . . the Korean women had everything to gain and nothing to lose by becoming a Christian. Her circle of social contacts were immediately widened and enriched. Christianity taught a higher status for women than what she had known.[57]

Although Protestant Christianity had been particularly important in liberating women in Korea generally, its influence was not country-wide but was geographically limited. Increases in membership before 1945 were much greater in North Korea than in South Korea. They were concentrated in Hwanghae and the two adjacent P'yongan Provinces.[58] As Roy E. Shearer said: "The hidden, exciting fact is that Christianity in northwest Korea was a growing and vital force in the society.[59] Consequently, it seems to be reasonable to believe that women in the North as compared to those in the South had much better opportunities to be free from traditional Confucian patriarchalism.

We have discussed thus far a new consciousness of the rights of women that surfaced toward the end of the nineteenth century. Aside from the somewhat better legal protection of women regarding educa-

---

[55] Ewha Hakpo, June 20, 1975, p. 3.

[56] Helen Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

[57] Charles Allen Clark, *The Korean Church and the Nevius Methods* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1930), p. 234.

[58] Roy E. Shearer, *Wildfire: Church Growth in Korea* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), p. 103.

[59] *Ibid.*

tion, name, and divorce, the position of women in Korea, however, still was a subordinate one. Nor did women fare any better under the Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945). All these years, according to Dr. Helen Kim, women had been just servants of men. She observed:

> . . . according to Japanese laws, women were treated like people of no importance or value along with children and crazy people.[60]

Under the Japanese rule, the Korean women had to suffer doubly in serving men as well as the Japanese oppressors.

The Japanese surrender in Korea on August 15, 1945, however, brought to an end the long night of oppression, exploitation and enslavement. The populace awoke, as in a daze, from a terrible nightmare. There were high hopes that a new day of peace, prosperity and freedom was dawning. Unfortunately, however, this dream has never come to realization. Korea has been a country divided since World War II into implacably hostile sides, one Communist and the other capitalist. As *Newsweek* recently described, "There is an enormous gulf between the capitalist south and the Communist north, but they remain to this day two halves of a single nation, the matter and antimatter of a divided people.[61]

III

In 1971, the Chinese Journalists' Delegation paid a visit to North Korea. Describing their impression of the women of that country, they wrote:

> At the centre of Korea's heroic capital, Pyongyang, stands the bronze statue of chollima, a winged horse with head high, speeding into the future. Like the man rider, the brave women on the pillion is off with the same lofty aim. Symbolic of the Korean people's revolutionary spirit, it depicts the heroism of the Korean women along with the men.[62]

This valiant image of women is a drastic change, considered in the context of the inequalities and underdevelopment inherited from the past.

Today North Korea, or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (the DPRK), claims that women are "enjoying equal rights as men in the social, political, economic, cultural and other fields of a worthy

---

[60] Helen Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
[61] *Newsweek*, June 30, 1975, p. 32.
[62] *The Heroic Korean People* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1972), p. 36.

life as the true masters of the country and society and as happy mothers."[63]

North Korea's commitment to equality for women is spelled out most clearly in the Articles of the Law on the Equality of the Sexes, promulgated on July 20, 1946.[64] In general, they are:

Article 1 Women are accorded equal rights with men in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social, and political life.

Article 2 Women, like men, have the right to elect and to be elected in the local and the highest state organs.

Article 3 Women have the equal right with men in labor, equal payment, social insurance and education.

Article 4 Women have the equal right with men in the free choice for marriage. The arbitrary and compulsory marriage which disregards the consent of the parties is prohibited.

Article 5 Women, like men, have the right in freedom of divorce in case the relationship between husband and wife becomes difficult with no hope of continuing relationship.

Article 6 A marriage can be contracted only after the woman has reached 17 years of age and the man 18 years of age.

Article 7 Polygamy and the selling of girls as concubines or wives, which are medieval and feudalistic vestiges, are prohibited as infringement upon human rights of women.

Public prostitution, private prostitution and the institution of "kisaeng" (courtesan) are prohibited.

Article 8 Women have the equal right with men in the ownership of property and the inheritance of land.

By this law, the Communists in North Korea desired to liberate the women who were traditionally subjected to all sorts of humiliation and subordinate positions. Women have been encouraged to play their role in the reconstruction of the country. The government has, therefore, provided conditions and programs which enable women to be free of the work that tied them to their homes, and to take more active part in the general labor force.

Day-care Centers are provided everywhere in the country where children may be enrolled at the age of three months. They are continued to be cared for until they go to kindergarten[65] at age five, and then receive ten years of compulsory school. According to an article in *People's Korea*:

---

[63] *The Times* (London) April 12, 1973, Advertisement.

[64] For detailed information, see Byong Su Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 189-192.

[65] In 1971 it was reported that 2,500,000 children were growing up at the nurseries and kindergartens at the expense of the state. The *Pyongyang Times*, October 9, 1971, p. 2.

> Compulsory 11-year education will be introduced on a full-scale basis throughout the country from September 1, this year (1975).[66]

Mothers are able to leave their children at these centers provided by the state, and enter the labor force. But it appears that the Child-care Center Program has other goals as well. It is used as a program for "an early socialist indoctrination[67] for the younger generation. Officially it is claimed that:

> The public upbringing of children is the most effective and excellent method whereby our youngsters are brought up to become the true men of the communist type.[68]

In addition to this child care program, women in North Korea are given free hospital delivery aid and are granted seventy-seven days paid maternity leave. Mothers who have more than three children are allowed to work six hours a day and get paid for eight hours labour[69] Furthermore, there are catering facilities such as rice-cooking factories, and laundries, established in residential quarters to lighten the household burdens of the women.[70]

At the Fifth Congress of the Workers' Party of North Korea held in November 1970, the emancipation of women from the heavy burdens of kitchen and household work was set as one of the three major tasks of the technical revolution to be carried out in the Six-Year Plan period.[71] In view of these facts, it appears that the society is geared to give support to the working mother and to spare her the double burden which other women have in so many parts of the world.

Today, North Korea claims that women account for nearly half of the labor composition of the national economy. According to Edward Kim who visited North Korea in 1973 as the first American photo-journalist:

> Women make up a third of the industrial workers, and more than half of all farm workers. Military service falls equally on both sexes.[72]

---

[66] The *People's Korea,* April 16, 1975, p. 3.

[67] Edward Kim, "Rare Look at North Korea," *National Geographic,* Vol. 146 (August, 1974), p. 272.

[68] The *Pyongyang Times,* October 9, 1971, p. 2.

[69] This was made possible in October 1966 by the workday regulation for women.

[70] The *Pyongyang Times,* March 8, 1975, p. 3.

[71] The *Pyongyang Times,* October 9, 1971, p. 2.

[72] Edward Kim, *op. cit.,* p. 272.

While the Supreme People's Assembly, the highest power organ, had seventy-three women deputies (sixteen per cent of the total) in 1967,[73] it has 113 at present.[74] Even with the increased membership, the percentage of women in positions of political leadership appears to be relatively low. It is reported this year:

> More than 900 women work as chairmen of the management boards of co-op farms and many of the directors of modern factories and chairman of county cooperative farm management committees are women. The women engineers, assistant engineer and specialists number 162,567.[75]

Women in the field of education play a very great role. The statistics of 1959 show: eighty per cent in the primary schools, fifty per cent in the middle schools, thirty per cent in the technical schools, and fifteen per cent in the university.[76] More women than men teach in the low level of schools — women predominate in the nurseries and kindergartens. Addressing the National Congress of Nursery School and Kindergarten Teachers in 1966, President Kim Il Sung emphasized:

> Of course, all work in education is important, but above all, that of nursery school and kindergarten teachers who rear the small children is more important.

He continued to say:

> By nature, it is up to the women to bring up children. To make light of such an important and honourable job as the upbringing of our little ones, the successors to our revolution and the reserves of communist builders, cannot be regarded as an attitude worthy of the women of our time who are advancing to Communism.[77]

In addition, we are told that "the textile work force is largely female."[73]

In the light of these facts, it appears that in the distribution of jobs in North Korea, there is some tendency to cling to traditional patterns. Sex role differences still seem apparent and are freely admitted even by the country's president as expressed in his address.

---

[73] In Dok Kang, ed., *Pukhanjonso* (Compendium of Works on North Korea), Vol. II (Seoul: Research Center for Far Eastern Affairs, 1974), p. 220.

[74] The *Pyongyang Times*, March 8, 1975, p. 3.

[75] *Ibid.*

[76] In Dok Kang, *loc. cit.*

[77] Kim Il Sung, "The Communist Education and Upbringing of Children is an Honourable Revolutionary Duty of Nursery School and Kindergarten Teacher," in *Kim Il Sung Selected Works*, Vol. IV (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1971), p. 461.

[78] Harrison E. Salisbury, *To Peking — And Beyond; A Report of the New Asia* (New York Times Book Co., 1973), p. 203.

As the North Korean women begin to make their participation in economic production, they appear to have attained a better position in the family as well. To the communists this is a predictable result which is taken for granted. As Engels already declared in the nineteenth century: "The emancipation of women will only be possible when women can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time."[79]

Today we are told that the North Koreans have established new family relationships based on democratic harmony, putting an end to the traditional patriarchal family relationship under which the man oppressed the woman, and the woman relied on the man for her means of life. Both husband and wife are now economically independent. The relationship between them is said to be that of comrades. Also, it is said that a daughter-in-law need no longer be subordinate to her parents-in-law as was the case in the olden days. That is because she, like her parents-in-law, became a member of the socialist workers, contributing to building up a new socialist society. In short, the North Koreans assert that this sort of socialist family is based on love and respect among the members, and each member of the family is fully ensured of equality.[80]

IV

Until the recent past, the women's situation in North Korean cities appears, however, to have differed from that in the countryside. In the cities there were more cultural, educational, medical, and other advantages. Work was more technologically advanced and socialized. And so many women seem to have made more progress in the cities. As late as 1966, *Korean Women,* a publication of the Woman's Union of North Korea, had an article on a city woman crane-operator who married a country farm worker in spite of many unfavourable conditions. This was incomprehensible to ordinary people who usually saw the country girl seeking marriage with the city boy.[81] Women's status in the countryside, however, is said to have changed drastically for the

---

[79] Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1942), p. 148.

[80] See Il Ch'un Kim, "Nongch'on Kunrochatului Saeroun Munhwa wa Saenghawl P' ungsupe Kwanhayo" (On the New Culture and Pattern of Life in Farming Villages), *Compendium of Studies on Folklore,* Vol. II (Pyongyang: Academy of Science, 1959), pp. 22-24.

[81] "Risang'gwa Haenboke Taehan Saenggak." (Thoughts on The Ideal and Happiness), *Chosonnyosong* (Korean Women), May 1966, p. 58.

better with the coming of the cooperative farms since 1954.[82] Today, in North Korea there are some "3,800 collective farms" bristling "with tractors and other machinery."[83]

Harrison Salisbury of *The New York Times,* after his visit in 1972 to the Chongsan-ri collective farm, one of the finest collective farms in North Korea, wrote:

> This is a far higher degree of mechanization than I found on even the finest Chinese communes, and the level would exceed that of most Soviet farms.[84]

Then he added: "To be sure, Chongsan-ri is a model, nonetheless, the other collective farms of North Korea follow its pattern."[85]

We are told that family incomes at the Chongsan-ri cooperative farm ranged in 1973 "from 3,500 won ($1,750) to 8,000 won ($4,000), plus seven to ten tons of grain, depending on how many family members work.[86] Living conditions in this kind of model village is expected to be better than other co-ops were family income averages 2,500 won ($1,250) and five tons of rice a year.[87]

What is important regarding our discussion of women's status in the countryside, however, is that in the cooparative farm each member receives equal pay according to the individual work points, regardless of sex. In North Korea this has been considered a very important factor which place women on an equal footing with men. Because of this, it is believed that even an unmarried daughter no longer depends on her father for a living, and a daughter-in-law need no longer be under the restraints of her parents-in-law.[88]

Now, North Korea's socialist state takes pride in saying that the gap between the countryside and the city is eliminated. A recent *Newsweek* article reports:

> Recent visitors who have seen the countryside was well as the capital say that there is every evidence the North Koreans live well, if simply, and that blatant poverty is non-existent. Most farms have been mechanized and irrigated, and the country recently became self-sufficient in food for the first time in its 30-year history.[89]

---

[82] Sin Suk Kim, *op. cit.,* p. 38.
[83] Edward Kim, *op. cit.,* p. 260.
[84] Salisbury, *op. cit.,* p. 198.
[85] *Ibid.*
[86] Edward Kim, *op. cit.,* p. 272.
[87] *Ibid.*
[88] Sin Suk Kim, *op. cit.,* p. 38.
[89] *Newsweek,* June 30, 1975, p. 33.

A *New York Times* correspondent earlier wrote in a similar vein, in 1972:

> Although living standards are still low, the sharp disparities between the countryside and the cities that prevail in so many developing countries are being leveled out. Indeed, the cash income of the peasants on the big cooperative farms appears to exceed that of the industrial workers.[90]

In view of these facts, it is assumed that a great change in the women's status of North Korea has taken place both in cities and in the countryside.

Let us now consider marriage and love in connection with the emancipation of women from the traditional patriarchalism. Even though the free choice of partners has been ensured by law, an amalgamation of old tradition (arranged marriage) and modern custom (love marriage) seems to have become a common form of marriage for a number of years. In this respect, a writer in 1964 made the following statement in the *Korean Women*:

> There is no doubt in my mind that the wishes of the two partners should be taken into primary consideration. But at the same time, the opinions of the parents and the family members are absolutely not to be neglected.[91]

In 1966, a local leader of the Women's Union also advised the young people not to neglect parents' wishes regarding marriage. She said in this connection: "It is not right to ignore parents' opinion completely on the ground that the young people are in a new era."[92]

This may be interpreted to mean that the old custom of marriage can hardly be dislodged without resistance, even under the sweeping reforms of Communism. This is especially true in rural areas where the custom had been deeply rooted. It is believed that 'love marriage', western style, may take a considerable time to become a way of life in North Korea.

It seems evident that after marriage, husband and wife are encouraged to engage in economic production and to build up a new society. In other words, personal sentiments of love and mutual at-

---

[91] Kap Ki Lee, "Yakhonkwa Kyolhon" (Engagement and Marriage), *Chosonnyosong* (Korean Women), November 1964, p. 47.

[92] Kye Son Kim, et. al., "Nongch'on Ch'onyotului Kyolhonmunje" (On the Problem of Marriage for the Girls in Rural Areas), *ibid.*, May, 1966, p. 57.

tachment must be subordinated to loyalty to the Communist party and its leader and, therefore, to the state. Apparently, the North Korean Communists believe that love is not a personal but a social affair. This theme was repeatedly elaborated on in the column "Love, Marriage and the Home" of the magazine *Korean Women*. A couple of samples of this theme are sufficient to serve our purpose:

> Love cannot be an end in itself, but should lead to a true goal of life and to make it come to realization. Is not that kind of love the most desirable for this revolutionary age?[93]

A correspondent of *Korean Women* describes a 'communist mother' as one

> who finds true happiness through serving others, and gives undivided loyalty to the Party and its leader.[94]

While recognizing the many kinds of affection and loyalties that people have — love between husband and wife, parental love, love between brothers — and their importance, what is stressed is a 'higher form of love' which is expressed through the love of the collective and comrades. This concept was succinctly described by one of the women students of Kim Il Sung University in Pyongyang:

> Those who sacrifice their lives for the sake of the collective and comrades without the slightest hesitation are more beautiful and sublime.[95]

In short, we are told that in North Korea, sacrifical love is nobler than personal love. Self-realization appears to matter little. In serving the people, one is said to find a higher happiness.

As has been observed in many other Communist countries, out of this kind of ideal seems to follow a puritanical atmosphere. For example, while the emancipation has freed women in almost every field of activity, no actual sexual freedom seems to have developed. Edward Kim, a *National Geographic* journalist, relates that while strolling along a beautiful beach near the city of Wonsan at the East Sea, he came upon a sign: "MEN" — right on the beach. Then, farther on, another sign: "WOMEN" — also, on the beach. His guide explained, on questioning, that the beach was divided into two sections so that men

---

[93] Ung Ho Park, "Chinjonghan Sarangiran?" (What is True Love?), *ibid.*, March 1966, p. 24.

[90] *The New York Times*, June 4, 1972, p. 15.

[94] "Kongsanjui Omoni" (A Communist Mother), *ibid.*, June 1966, p. 60.

[95] Myong Suk Kim, "Urisitaeui Charang Suroun Yongungch'nyo" (Our Proud Heroine in Our Times), *Ch'onrima* (Winged Horse), July 1973, p. 82.

and women could have separate bathing areas because they preferred it that way. The guide then asked curiously, if it was true in the so-called nudist camps in America, men and women do not wear any clothes. It was unimaginable that there could be such a thing in the world — the guide could not really believe it.

Having seen this still prevalent restriction of sexual freedom, Kim commented in his article that: "The 'new morality' of the West has made little impression on North Korea's younger generation. I seldom see expressions of affection in public."[96]

It is a very interesting contrast to see the attitude of sexual restraint that characterized the North Koreans under Communism, and today's sexual revolution under way in the Soviet Union. According to a recent *New York Times* article:

> In the Soviet Union, 27 out of 100 marriages now end in divorce, one of ten births is illegitimate and among younger people premarital and extra-marital sex is becoming the norm rather than the exception.[97]

For the North Korean young people, it appears to be a long way to go for such increasing sexual permissiveness as that existing in some of the Communist countries today.

North Korean Communism appears to have liberated women as well as the young people from the traditional patriarchalism. But they have not been permitted to use their freedom for self-indulgence. We are informed that in North Korea social activities for the young are mostly organized groups, and young adults find mates through work, social, and study programs.[98] The idea of privacy seems unimportant.

In North Korea, "marriage before the age of twenty-five is said to be "discouraged"[99] now. Despite their late marriage, however, birth control methods have not been encouraged. This is interpreted to mean that with only a fifteen million population, North Korea could easily absorb a larger growth in population to strengthen the labor force. As a matter of fact, mothers who have large families enjoy high regard. To the Western observer it may be a mystery what the many unmarried young men and women do to satisfy emotional needs. They seem too busy to waste their time thinking about what we call romance or

---

[96] Edward Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 267.
[97] *The New York Times*, June 17, 1975, p. 2.
[98] Edward Kim, op. cit., *loc. cit.*
[99] *Ibid.*

immoral sexuality. North Korea today appears to be a cloister filled with the spirit of monastic discipline. As Salisbury puts it, North Koreans are dedicating themselves intensely "to the work ethic."[100] In North Korea today, work seems to be a virtue in the same way that it was in nineteenth-century America.

Today's North Korean women are pictured in newspapers or magazines as tractor drivers, lathe operators, crane operators, university students, railway station operators, textile workers, scientists, professors, members of the Supreme People's Assembly, members of the militia, and members of the army. Women in North Korea are clearly pictured "as proud masters of country and society and dependable builders of socialism."[101]

---

[100] Salisbury, *op. cit.*, p. 195.
[101] The *Pyongyang Times*, March 8, 1975, p. 3.